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Wood and Canvas

(and Rabbit Glue)

By Margaret Mitchell

in the Modern World

Antwerp's historically significant Bourla theatre trapped between the past and future

“With two fingers, all space can move.”—Jean-Guy Lecat

The municipal opera house of Antwerp, the Bourla Schouwburg, is caught between its past and its future—lodged in a kind of purgatory between its great historical significance and the desire to keep the theater as a vital venue for modern companies. For historians, designers, and technicians who have crawled through the pristine restored substages and lofts of the Castle Theatre at Český Krumlov, or in the Slotsteater at Drottningholm Palace in Stockholm, the Bourla backstage is a sharp contrast, with five stories of machinery above and below the stage. She is a dying giantess, a vast and impressive *salle des machines* shrouded in cobwebs and



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E

Image A: The lowest sub stage machinery with large drums and shafts.
 Image B: Fly loft with work bridges.
 Image C: Upper level fly loft.
 Image D: Winches below the stage.
 Image E: Chariots of the highest sub stage level.

22 years of neglect. Rain comes in through holes in the roof. Many of the floorboards are unsafe for passage. The Bourla's winches, drums, axles, elevators, traps, and chariots are intact and asleep, their idle ropes hanging in tangles or tatters.

In 2013, Antwerp city officials conducted a feasibility study at the request of Het Toneelhuis, the theatre company currently residing at the Bourla. This study investigated the modernization of the space resulting in the desire to gut the 181-year-old theater by replacing the original wooden machinery with automated rigging systems, eliminating the raked deck,

and reconfiguring the auditorium. The feasibility study was not publically shared; however, stage designers and technicians in Antwerp became aware of the proposals within the document. In the wake of a growing trend across Europe to replace historic machinery with modern automated systems, artists and technicians began to speak openly about the possible dismemberment of the opera house. The Bourla Schouwburg is one of the very few public theaters with surviving original wooden machinery in Europe; it is the last theater of its kind in Belgium.

Collisions of values and visions, of dreams and practicalities came to a dramatic head at the symposium "Wood and Canvas (and rabbit glue) in the Modern World," held in Antwerp in June 2014. The symposium was organized by OISTAT and TheatrEurope members who share an intense desire to save the wooden machinery of the Bourla theater. The conference

was the apotheosis of a small crusade, led by Ivo Kersmaekers, Jérôme Maeckelbergh, and Peter McKinnon who gathered together some of the most important minds in theater architecture, restoration, and curation in the world. (Visit <http://woodandcanvas.info.yorku.ca/list-of-papers/> for the full list of conference papers.)

The ultimate goal of the gathering was to debate the future of the Bourla, and perhaps even persuade city officials and Het Toneelhuis members to revoke their plans for the theater's demise. Symposium participants were graciously led by the technical director of Het Toneelhuis, Freek Boey, through the backstage, substage, fly loft, and auditorium so participants could see firsthand the beautiful 1993 front-of-house renovations as well as the state of the wooden machinery (see photos at left).

HET TONEELHUIS'S PARADOX

Ensnared in the Bourla, Het Toneelhuis finds itself experiencing a paradox. The desire for cutting-edge scenography practices is confounded by a space designed for large musical entertainments in the mid-19th century. The building impedes the company's contemporary technical needs. The raked stage and the lack of a state-of-the-art fly system are perceived to be financial obstacles because these features make the venue difficult or impossible for incoming tours. Het Toneelhuis is eligible to receive government subsidies for touring.

The raked stage complicates the design of scenery for the company because the theaters to which they could tour have flat floors. Likewise, productions coming into the Bourla are confronted with a raked stage and few fly bars. The Bourla has 24 fly bars and Het Toneelhuis prefers 72 automated fly bars for touring possibilities. The extant fly system, which was installed between the wooden machinery in 1993, is no longer up to code. Het Toneelhuis also wants a 14-by-14 meter playing space. However, the opening of the proscenium is 10 meters, 53 centimeters. The size and functionality of the playing space and fly system, the logistical touring problems, and the loss of government funding are all real concerns for the resident company.

Education about the theater and lack of workshop facilities are also difficult realities for Het Toneelhuis. The young technical staff is confronted by old technology for which adequate training no longer readily exists. The extensive chariot and pole system, traps, and old fly loft have all become obstacles in their states of neglect. Het Toneelhuis and city officials wish to replace all the wooden machinery with automated systems. The company hopes to build workshops, offices, and rehearsal or storage spaces beneath the stage floor. The proposed flattening of the deck would also largely destroy the auditorium's sightlines, and to solve this new problem, Het Toneelhuis proposes that the pit floor extend in a rake to the first balcony. If carried



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out, this proposal would alter the Bourla's auditorium drastically. The relationship of the raked deck to the auditorium's pit, boxes, and balconies is in delicate balance for the retention of optimal sightlines. Gutting the substage and flattening the deck in the Bourla are excellent examples of renovation decisions that will cause a landslide loss for the integrity of the theater.

RESTORATION CONSIDERATIONS

Preservation, restoration, and renovation are related but potentially diverse activities. While preservation is the act of preserving and maintaining the original or current state, and restoration is the act of restoring something to a state at a particular point in history, renovation refers to bringing to a state of repair and usefulness. It may or may not involve restoration or preservation.

The charming 160-seat Palace Theater in Český Krumlov, built around 1683, closed for restoration 1966, and reopened in 1993, is a beautiful example of careful consideration of extant artifacts and architecture. Led by head curator Dr. Pavel Slavko, the staff, scholars, and students at Český Krumlov have studied in detail the machinery, lighting conditions, equipment, scenery, props and costumes.

Jiří Bláha, an expert on Czech historical theaters (and the designs of Josef Platzer) says that although preservation and restoration were the primary focus of the work at the Palace Theater, some restoration details proved unfeasible due to modern fire and safety codes. Some aspects of the theater were reconstructed to simulate rather than reproduce historic circumstances. The desired modern functions of the building and its contents informed the renovation decisions.

The beautiful 249-year-old Slottsteater at Drottningholm is similar. In order to protect the extant original sets, all the sets currently used for performances in the Slottsteater are duplicates, notes Torsten Nobling, an architect for the renovation and restoration. For obvious reasons, fire has been replaced with electric lighting, and modern handrails were installed to comply with current building codes. Unfortunately, tourist traffic has also impacted the building; some areas of the painstakingly

restored walls in the auditorium are damaged from the oils on the hands of visitors.

Both the Palace Theatre and the Slottsteater are living museums for stage technology, design, and performance. The impact of the possible wear and tear of the performances and general human interaction in the buildings has been considered in relationship to preservation needs.

Dr. David Wilmore, technical director, founder of Theatresearch, and foremost restoration expert and consultant from the United Kingdom, visited the Bourla in the 1980s, and with colleague John Earl, wrote an article appealing for its restoration. "The machinery as a whole is in an excellent state of repair and would require comparatively little work to restore it to full working order," said Wilmore 28 years ago. "It would however seem quite feasible to install all the modern technology and fire precaution equipment in a sympathetic manner,

A Brief History OF THE BOURLA

Pierre Bruno Bourla (1783-1866), the city architect of Antwerp, began designing the theater (known then as the Grand Théâtre or the Théâtre Royal Français) between 1827 and 1829. In 1860, Bourla hired Lodewijk Baeckelmans (1835-1871) to make drawings of the theater, which are now housed in the archives of the Museum Vleeshuis. Baeckelmans' drawings help us to understand the subsequent renovation of the Bourla by Peiter Dens (1819-1901) in 1865.

In the mid-19th century, the Théâtre Royal Français was losing audiences and revenue due to the popularity of the Dutch language theatres in Antwerp. In the hope of increasing profits, Dens enlarged the auditorium and improved the sightlines by changing the configuration of the ground floor. Dens laterally scooped out the auditorium floor in order to make room for more seats, but he maintained Bourla's original slope. Dens also raised the ceiling height of the auditorium, improved the royal boxes, and redesigned and supervised the interior décor executed by Auguste Rubé (1815-1899) and Philippe Chaperon (1823-1907). Other alterations were made to the floor plans of the front of house spaces. Dens' renovations did not impede the two-story fly loft and the three-story substage housing the original wooden

machinery designed by Humanité Philastre (1830-1847) and Charles Cambon (1802-1875) under the supervision of Bourla.

Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century, language preferences, government politics, and artistic innovations influenced audiences in Antwerp. The French language, the official language of Belgium between 1830 and 1938, was associated with the bourgeoisie. However, Flemish, a language almost identical to Dutch, was the language of the people. A political struggle over language and genre emerged regarding the repertoire at the Bourla and other grand theatres in Belgium. In 1853, a National Theatre, *Nationaal Toneelhuis*, the first Dutch theatre in Flanders to receive a state subsidy, was formed. Theatre managers struggled with the city council of Antwerp because the council desired Dutch translations of French plays and entertainments, thus keeping French forms culturally alive. The general public wanted Dutch language plays with vernacular subject matter, which was considered by the artistic elite to be lower class or populist.

In 1874, The National Theatre became *Nederlandse Schouwburg*/The Dutch Theatre, and managers continued to struggle with bourgeoisie agenda of the men who held the subsidy purse strings and the desire of the public who wanted a theatre that reflected their Flemish identity. In

causing little or no conflict within the Fly Tower. The recently restored Tyne Theatre and Opera House, Newcastle upon-Tyne, which was ravaged by fire on Christmas Day 1985, has shown that careful modernisation can allow counterweights to co-exist alongside hemp sets and drum and shaft, all operated from a brand new timber grid and flying galleries. Not only can such work be carried out practically, efficiently and, more importantly, economically, the end result produces a building which has undergone a total historical restoration.”

Wilmore has extensive experience with restorations, including the Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond, Theatre Royal Newcastle upon Tyne, the Gaiety Theatre & Opera House on the Isle of Man, and most recently, The Globe in Stockton. During the symposium, Wilmore stated that the replacement of wooden machinery with modern automated machinery in so many large theaters in Europe (such as the Ghent Opera

House, La Monnaie, and La Scala) make the Bourla's restoration even more significant.

He also highlighted the advantages of wooden construction: the strength of mortise and tenon joints, the rigidity and stability of long expanses of wood, and the creation of jobs to employ and train stagehands to safely operate the machinery. He suggested that productions such as *The Phantom of the Opera* are bridges between the past and the present; designers of such musicals could take advantage of historic technology.

BOURLA'S PHYSICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The Bourla is surrounded by pedestrian streets along its north and south sides, and roadways on the east and west sides. The buildings along Kelderstraat to the north and Orgelstraat to the south are about 30 feet away from the exterior walls of the theater—making expansion in any direction impossible in the

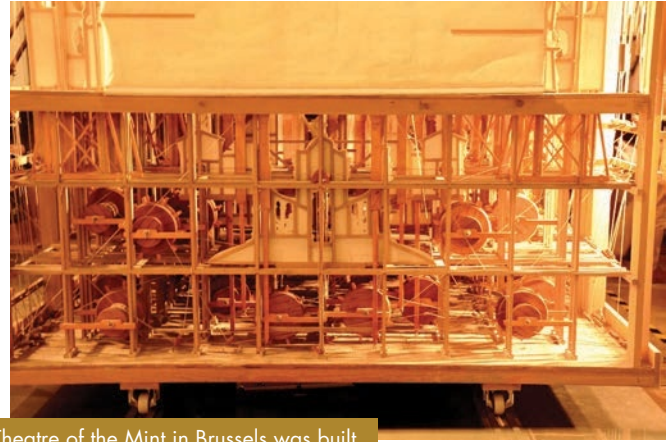
1906, The Dutch Theatre became the *Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg*/Royal Dutch Theatre, and the repertoire gradually shifted toward a new modern theatre with realist and anti-realist styles and with subject matter focused on social issues. The struggles of language, politics, and new artistic movements of the early 20th century affected audience attendance and eventually impacted the state of the building.

The Royal Dutch Theater moved into the Bourla in 1932, and in 1938 the building was declared a protected monument by the Belgian authorities. After World War II and the four-year Nazi occupation, Antwerp was in a state of identity recovery and physical reconstruction. Artists responded to their post-world-war situation with new sensibilities and reference points. The voices of Belgian playwrights were recognized in European avant guard circles, and theater buildings such as the Bourla may have indeed seemed unfit relics for the production of new work. Theatre activity in the Bourla declined from the 1950s to the late 1970s due to ongoing issues involving the divisions of politics, classist perceptions, and artistic expressions.

In 1980, the theater was abandoned when the Royal Dutch Theatre moved to the new modern Municipal Theatre 700 feet away. The city officials of Antwerp seriously considered destroying the neglected Bourla in the 1990s, even though

the building had protected status. Fortunately, a contrary pivotal decision was made to restore the theater, but restoration focused mainly on the public spaces. Many features of Pierre Bourla's original design were reinstated in the auditorium. However, the wooden machinery, which was at the time easily repairable was cleaned, but not greatly repaired or restored, according to an article in *Cue*, by John Earl and David Wilmore, "The Bourla Theatre, Antwerp, A Candidate for Total Restoration." A modest electronic fly system was installed without impact to the old machinery. The restoration of the theater and the state of the machinery was well documented in the book, *De Bourla Schouwburg*, published in 1993 and edited by Madeleine Manderyck and Herman Van hunsel.

The Bourla reopened in 1993 and won the Europa Nostra prize, highlighting Antwerp as the Cultural Capital of Europe that year. In 1994, the Royal Dutch Theatre moved back to the Bourla, citing the Municipal Theatre was too large a space for performing plays and expressing its desire to play in the historic space with which the citizens of Antwerp identified so heavily. The Royal Dutch Theatre and the Blauwe Maandag Compagnie/Blue Monday Company merged in 1998 to form Het Toneelhuis, which has since gained critical international acclaim for its innovative work.



The Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie/Theatre of the Mint in Brussels was built in 1700, rebuilt in 1819, and renovated in 1986. The theater's museum houses a stunning scale model demonstrating baroque scene shifts and flying machines, among other historic machines and mechanisms.

current city plan. Yet, as noted, *Het Toneelhuis* wants an expansion of the stage space to 14-by-14 meters. Such an expansion would leave extremely narrow side stage areas of about 1 meter, 17 centimeters, according to Jérôme Maeckelbergh who has made extensive studies of the building.

Maeckelbergh also asserts that a state-of-the-art automated fly rail system would exceed (especially when moving) the weight bearing limitations of the building. The load bearing beams of the flies are the same beams supporting the roof. The La Monnaie renovation (and others) proved that modern

ous times in its history; however, the proposal to rake the floor of the pit to the first balcony level is indeed the most radical idea to date. This drastic alteration is in response to leveling the deck in order to aid touring capabilities, and in turn to improve subsidy funding for *Het Toneelhuis*. In a sightline study of the current Bourla proposal, Maeckelbergh demonstrated that the theater currently has 1,033 seats with good sightlines; after the proposed renovation, the number of good seats will fall to 699. Maeckelbergh's numbers are not in alignment with news media reports that the renovation will increase seats with good sightlines by 400.

Peter Ruthven Hall, a senior consultant with Charcoal-blue, an acoustical firm based in London and New York City, provided a study of raked stages in the United Kingdom, finding that 17 extant raked stages exist in the United Kingdom, with 13 of those in London's West End. Hall believes that raked stages provide intimacy with the audience. Mathematics proves that rakes provide better sightlines compared to flat floors in the same spaces. Rake stages make dance floor work more visible, and they also improve acoustics.

Hall's points about acoustics were supported by Per Simon Edström, author, playwright, designer, director, and former stage manager, who served as the stage manager at the Slottsteater. Edström was one of the few people present at the symposium with extensive practical experience working with wooden machinery. In Edström's presentation, he explained that the wood conducted sound and the stagehands listened to the machinery for their cues. Hall suggested that building an adaptable rake, like the one designed by Iain Mackintosh at the Cottesloe Theatre at the National Theatre in London, could offer a partial solution to the tension between touring demands and sightline problems. Mackintosh, who was also present at the symposium, strongly supported the idea of an adaptable

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automated systems require additional infrastructure for load-bearing support. The Bourla has no room for additional beams in the interior, and no room for exterior buttresses, given its landlocked situation. In addition to the roof problem, fly bars that could accommodate a 14-by-14 meter playing space cannot fit in the theater without tearing out load-bearing walls. The structural integrity of the building would be compromised with a stage expansion and automated fly rail system.

Architects have wrestled with the Bourla's interior at vari-

rake. However, a flat deck would continue to be problematic for touring companies without major architectural changes to the auditorium.

Further supporting assertions about the destruction of sightlines, architect Martien van Goor presented material on the consequences of removing the rake in the Koninklijke Schouwburg/The Royal Dutch Theatre at The Hague. Built in 1863, the Royal Dutch Theatre was closed by the fire department in 1912 and reopened in 1950 with a flat floor and a dysfunctional revolving stage. According to van Goor, Iain Mackintosh was engaged in the 1980s to study the possibility of reinstating the raked stage, but this endeavor was not accomplished. In further attempts to improve sightlines, the theater auditorium was renovated in 1997 and again reworked in 2012. Today the sightlines continue to be a point of dissatisfaction.

BOURLA'S LOST AND FOUND DÉCOR

As many of the symposium participants debated the elasticity (or lack thereof) of the theater over the course of three days, one presentation offered a glimpse of some long dead ghosts of the Bourla. Bruno Forment of the University of Ghent delivered a poignant and valuable lecture on the sets and props

used in 134 operas and operettas at the Bourla, from the 1830s to 1903. The stock sets, created by Antwerp artisans and craftsmen in the scenic studio of Albert Dubosq (1863-1940), were discovered in the Municipal Theatre Kortrijk.

At the turn of the 20th century, some of the older sets were repaired and reused; some designs were copies of La Monnaie sets in Brussels. More than 3,000 set pieces and props were destroyed because they were old and in bad condition; however, prior to destruction, Dubosq, a former student of Ciceri, photographed, inventoried, and documented the material using budget and repertory records. This inventory has been newly discovered and is housed in the *Felixarchieff* in Antwerp. Comparing lists and descriptions from 1833 to lists in 1903, Forment found that, in some cases, the lists were identical, indicating that some original sets likely designed by Philastre and Cambon survived until 1903. The inventory included large drops, borders, oblique shutters, book flats, and box sets with ceilings dating to the 1830s, as well as diagrams and instructions for installing box sets. This research illuminates the evolution of wing and drop sets to box sets. According to Forment, the inventory indicates that old wings were sometimes used to create the box sets. Décor was moved into place on the chariots, and gaps per-

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Image courtesy of the Institute of the Arts Barcelona

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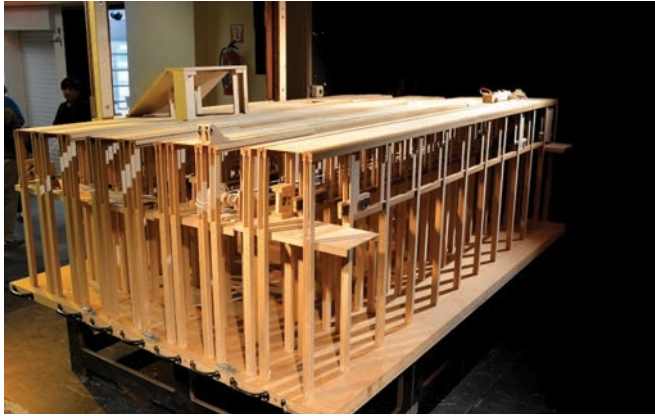
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Jerome Maeckelbergh and colleague Marc Brigou constructed an impressive working scale model of the Bourla's deck and three-story substage.



Maeckelbergh investigated the design and function of modern scenery using the chariots, elevators, and traps in the Bourla.

pendicular to the plaster line were filled in with flats. Eventually, book flats replaced décor on chariots; however, the book flat installation and strike was more labor intensive and sometimes undesirable. Forment's research indicates that stock sets were recycled and reworked to depict the more site specific settings that were eventually demanded by the style of realism. The valuable documentation of these destroyed sets and props has given us a window into Bourla's past, a vista that would have been completely lost without the foresight of Dubosq.

LOSS OF HISTORIC MACHINERY

The Bourla's landlocked situation, structural limitations, and confines of the auditorium space in relationship to a flat stage floor are integral and peripheral issues regarding the fate of the wooden machinery. Het Toneelhuis has assumed that the chariot and pole system, traps, elevators, and fly loft mechanisms are obsolete for the needs of contemporary theatre practice.

To preserve history, Antwerp city officials propose the machinery be extracted from the building and placed in a glass tower on another site for public viewing and study. A similar proposal was made for machinery in Ghent, which was also designed by Philastre and Cambon. After the Ghent machinery was removed, funding never materialized for the restoration project.

Rejecting the glass tower idea and the dissection of the wooden machinery from its historic context, two symposium presenters, Maeckelbergh and Jean-Guy Lecat, offered contemporary solutions using baroque scene shifting techniques. Maeckelbergh, a retired freelance designer and impassioned advocate in the public discourse over the Bourla's future, tested the assumption that old machinery could not serve modern needs. Maeckelbergh and his colleague Marc Brigou constructed an impressive working scale model of the Bourla's deck and three-story substage (see image above left). Maeckelbergh investigated the design and function of modern scenery using the chariots, elevators, and traps in the Bourla (see image below left). He also demonstrated fast appearances and disappearances of set pieces or performers.

The delighted symposium audience observed the marriage of projection screens and abstract forms carried singly or in groups upon the wooden chariots. Maeckelbergh suggested the machinery could be used for plays, musicals, operas, dance concerts, lectures, conferences and film screenings. Maeckelbergh's presentation demonstrated how perceived obstacles may be transformed into solutions by imagination and will.

A well-known technical director, theatre consultant, teacher, author, and designer, Lecat shared his design for *Guillaume Tell*, produced at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie in Liège, Belgium in 2013. This charming design was executed using a combination of old and new technology. The design functioned in the baroque manner, with stagehands moving set pieces using both wooden and electronic machinery. The design was organized in horizontal planes and the use of perspective was manipulated to give the space a greater illusion of depth. However, Lecat also commented on and played with perceptions of theatricality by exposing the work of the stagehands who operated the wooden machinery (see image at right). Flat cows, sheep and people tracked on; paper water flowed, and the famous arrow of William Tell glided across the stage in slow motion on a wire. Lecat's scenery exposed artifice, letting the audience in on the visual magic.

Both Lecat and Maeckelbergh demonstrated old technology reconceived and used in new ways. Maeckelbergh's ideas maintained hidden mechanisms; Lecat's *Guillaume Tell* exposed the tricks and by doing so, commented on them while making them a rhythmic aspect of the production.



Lecat shared his design for *Guillaume Tell*, produced at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie in Liège, Belgium in 2013. Lecat commented on and played with perceptions of theatricality by exposing the work of the stagehands who operated the wooden machinery.



THE SHOWDOWN

On the fourth morning of the symposium, city officials and representatives from Het Toneelhuis joined the conversation in a panel discussion. Panelists included Guy Cassiers, artistic director of Het Toneelhuis; Jan Rombouts, cabinet secretary of the alderman of culture; Marc Lambert, who participated in

the feasibility study; and Frank Peeters of the University of Antwerp's Department of Theatre Studies. Moderated by Staf Vos of Het Firmament, the National Center for Cultural Heritage of the Performing Arts, the discussion covered arguments for the improvement of the Bourla.

Panelists said the Bourla is beloved by the city, and Het



Declaration in Support of the Bourla

During the symposium, it became clear to participants that some kind of public declaration should be written to the city officials of Antwerp. Peter McKinnon from York University drafted a statement that was quickly edited and signed by 44 participants:

“We, the theatre scholars and practitioners from 17 countries on 4 continents that are gathered in Antwerp at the ‘Wood and Canvas’ conference, were appalled to learn this morning a proposal to dismantle the old machinery system in the Bourla Theatre. This shocking news has galvanized us to write to you to protest this misguided idea. We are not just of the opinion that the machinery in the Bourla is of profound and global historical interest. It is our collective experience that the kind of machinery that is in the Bourla is being brought back to life everywhere in the world where such machinery exists. Its “new” value is being recognized partly because the staging techniques that are easily (and cheaply) possible with the old machinery are prohibitively expensive using modern technology. Additionally, large scale privately funded theatrical productions are sharply on the rise around the world and these shows need houses and stages like the Bourla, and it is remarkable to us that the city of Antwerp might allow this economic opportunity to be destroyed. The Bourla is not, and has never been, a theatre primarily for spoken word. Rather, it is a place for musical entertainment of all kinds. Of course, the historical nature of the theatre and its machinery could also become an educational and tourist destination, and therefore an economic engine for the city of Antwerp. Clearly the resident company has needs that are not being met, and many suggestions have come up at the conference that we would be pleased to explore with you. We urge you most strongly not allow this gem to be lost, without other avenues being explored, so that Antwerp can capitalize on its resources and realize its economic potential.”

The Association of Historic Theatres in Europe proposed the Bourla’s plight to Europa Nostra, who reacted to the Bourla’s situation by placing the wooden machinery on its list of seven most endangered sites of European cultural heritage in May 2014. Europa Nostra is a citizen-based activist organization formed to protect and to preserve the cultural heritage of Europe. Europa Nostra lobbies the European Union for endangered status, which can ultimately lead to World Heritage designations, thus greatly protecting threatened sites. The wooden machinery of the Bourla is not yet permanently protected. If the theater is not destroyed in the future, Het Toneelhuis and the citizens of Antwerp have the task of breathing life back into the sleeping giantess by making modern work in the historic space. They will prove that the Bourla can survive intact through multiple and creative directions and generations.

Toneelhuis must reside there because the building is inextricably entwined in the city’s cultural identity. Furthermore, the modern Municipal Theatre was and is unsuitable. As Artistic Director Cassiers remarked, “My studies were not in theatre. I am an artist. I know nothing about technique. . . theatre creates an identity for its citizens. . . the theatre must be what we need today.”

Cassiers maintained that Antwerp audiences were interested in modernization, and that there was no public interest in funding the restoration and use of the wooden machinery.

They argued that both the wooden machinery and flies installed in 1993 are dangerous and antiquated. Lambert and Peeters both acknowledged that the stage machinery is unique and valuable for historians and students, but neither the public nor the national government would support restoration. This point of view is certainly evident in many 19th century European opera houses that have restored and renovated auditoriums and façades for the public eye, but that have also been gutted internally behind the proscenium arch in the interest of modernization.

The panel pointed to La Scala as an exemplary restoration project. Symposium participants countered that the Italian stagehands have lost all their history—that La Scala has lost much of its history.

As the debate continued, the divergent values were exposed. “Perspective is being lost in multiple ways,” said Kate Burnett, award-winning British designer, author, and educator. “Depth is not understood in contemporary design because screen technology and projections are in vogue,” she said, adding that there is value in teaching old technology. Tolis Papazoglou, a Greek New Zealander, pointed out that actors are still trained in the ancient Greek theatres; he compared the potential destruction of the Bourla to an unthinkable destruction of Epidaurus. Contemporary innovative design has survived for decades in the ancient theatres. Lecat, who has worked over the course of his lifetime in many historic spaces in various states of restoration or ruin, stated simply that the baroque methods work, and there is no need to replace a system that works.

While Vos deftly moderated the opinions volleyed between the panel and the Wood and Canvas participants, the panelists were stopped in their tracks by Wilmore, who explained that the installation of an automated system would

Although the Bourla has major historic significance, ultimately the heritage and fate of the building belongs to the citizens of Antwerp.

be extraordinarily expensive and would need to be replaced in 30 years. Many parts would need to be replaced at great expense every six to eight years. However, the wooden machinery could be repaired and restored to working order at a fraction of the cost, six to seven times less than the installation of an automated system. The repaired wooden machinery will last for generations because it is easy and economical to maintain, he said. A representative from Trekwerk, who personally sold the automated rigging systems, eagerly supported



Maren Searle '14; *Metamorphoses*; photo by Michal Daniel

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Wilmore's financial assessments of the Bourla's future.

Wilmore went on to discuss employment implications for both kinds of machinery: automated systems requiring few stagehands vs. wooden machinery requiring more stagehands. When the financial implications of automated machinery vs. restoration of wooden machinery were clearly explained, the panel members appeared to consider the argument.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ANTWERP

Maeckelbergh and Lecat aptly demonstrated that old technology could service new scenography in the Bourla. However, the subsidy issue is driving the touring needs, which could greatly impact the future of the theater. If subsidies and touring are imperative for a stable budget, then Het Toneelhuis is in the wrong building. How can Het Toneelhuis make effective work in a theater it can't understand or operate? As Carsten Jung, Secretary-General of PERSPECTIV, the Association of Historic Theatres in Europe, writes in his blog, *Theatres Route*: "What kind of artists, what sort of technicians does Toneelhuis have, one is inclined to ask, who have had unique opportunities in front of them for the last 20 years, possibilities no other theater in Belgium offers and only very few theaters in Europe still have--and they don't exploit these opportunities? Why aren't they creative in this respect, too?"

Jung's questions dive to the heart of the conflict. Het Toneelhuis and city officials see the solutions to their problems only in a modern context, and are following the renovation examples of many opera houses and grand theaters in Europe. Many symposium participants agreed that three things are indeed possible: saving and using the wooden machinery in both historic and modern ways, installing an adaptable rake, and making the Bourla a major destination for tourists and scholars through performances, festivals, and educational programs.

Experienced curators, historians, and development directors at the palace theaters at Drottningholm and Český Krumlov have created educational programs, baroque festivals, and performances for many years, drawing students, teachers, and audiences from all over the world. These theaters intensify the cultural value of their communities and maintain a living history of theatre practice.

Maeckelbergh, Wilmore, and others envision an educational center where the training of stagehands and conservationists could take place. The Bourla is the only theater in Belgium and one of the very few theaters in Europe that could stage large musical productions/operas using original historic machinery. The Bourla could be the site of a major baroque festival, and like the New Globe in London, both modern and historic performance conditions could be explored. For these ideas to become reality, the Bourla would have to find its audience both internationally and locally. A transformed Bourla, one that preserves its machinery, one that is the home of Het Toneelhuis, and one that is a major international gathering place for theatre culture would have to become a need for the city.

Although the Bourla has major historic significance, ultimately the heritage and fate of the building belongs to the citizens of Antwerp. Theatre artists, restoration experts, architects, and historians are raising the banner to save the Bourla for future generations, but at this point in time, these leaders are unsure if anyone will follow. ❖

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